DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 215 300 CS 006 589

AUTHOR Rogers, C. D.
TITLE Ruth Strang's Diagnostic Legacy.
PUB DATE Nov 81
NOTE 11p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the California Reading Association (15th, Anaheim, CA, November 5-7, 1981).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Educational Philosophy; Elementary Secondary Education; *Reading Comprehension; *Reading Diagnosis; *Reading Instruction; *Reading Teachers; Reading Tests; *Teacher Role
IDENTIFIERS *Strang (Ruth)

ABSTRACT

To her students at the University of Arizona, Ruth Strang emphasized the theme "look beyond." By that she meant to look beyond the mediocrity and routine that stiffles lives and be a creative reading teacher and diagnostician. Reading teachers, she maintained, should understand that reading comprehension requires the ability to read the lines and repeat what the author says, the ability to read between the lines to interpret and appraise what the author says, and the ability to read beyond the lines to reflect on what the author says. Strang also suggested that teachers take a broad view of diagnosis and recognize the complexity of the reading process. She argued that reading teachers should learn to apply theory--to use the text for the good of the person and not for the test--and to look beyond the stanine, the percentile, and the grade level of a standardized test to analyze responses. They should understand the abuses and misuses of standardized tests. Ruth Strang asked her students to determine what kind of comprehension they were measuring, to determine the relationship of standardized reading scores to the student's instructional needs, and to determine what results of the test could be repeated. She asked her students to look beyond as a challenge to humanity, as a challenge to be. (HOD)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED215300

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

C.D. Rogers

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

Ruth Strang's Diagnostic Legacy

C.D. Rogers

At 4:40 p.m., spring semester, 1960, Ruth Strang taught Reading Methods at the University of Arizona. A brown spiral notebook contains the notes I took in that Tuesday and Thursday class. One recurring theme exists on these pages: Look beyond. What was she telling us?

First, I believe she was saying look beyond the mediocrity and routine that stiffles our lives and be a creative person, reading teacher, and diagnostician. Archibald Macleish, poet, put it this way: "We have learned the answers, all the answers: It is the questions that we do not know." Ralph Waldo Emerson said much the same when he wrote, "Society is always taken by surprise by any new display of common sense." One Monday evening, 1962, Dr. Strang graciously prepared dinner for me after her late class. I arrived after my day of teaching reading and English at Tucson High School. Over peach melba I poured my frustrations of the day. For four weeks I had worked to develop group discipline with 25 "poor readers with potential," in plain language 25 reading problems complicated with behavioral interferences. Then the counselor dropped one hard core discipline case, recently kicked from another class, into the group. It took the newcomer exactly one hour to dissolve four weeks of group dynamic cohesion. Dr. Strang listened attentively and spoke vivaciously as we discussed the role of the reading teacher and the counselor. Then, alas over tea, I recalled she was my dissertation advisor and started listing the textbook descriptions of the ideal teacher-counselor role. A look of sadness crossed her face. She

CS006589

suffered no hypocracy. When she wrote, "Diagnosis is never complete" was she not saying what Disraeli said, "Life is too short to be little;" what Picasso said, "It takes a long time be become young," and really what the scientist wrote to a young man in London who asked, "How do you do research?" The scientist replied, "You do it according to your own personality, if any."

Second she challenged us to think and to challenge students to think. It bothered her to walk into a library. "I see the students pouring over their books," she said, "their heads down. They never raise their eyes from the line until they finish. Then they close the book and get up, never pausing to think." As far as I know Dr. Strang never owned a car in Arizona. I'd meet her walking home from class, always stately with that tall model figure, always in her walking tennis shoes.

"Do you want a ride?"

"No thanks. I do my best thinking walking." She did a lot of walking.

She emphasized the different levels of comprehension and promoted critical reading as much as anyone in the field I know. She challenged us to explore these depths. "Comprehension," she wrote in Problems in the Improvement of Reading (McGraw-Hill Book Company, Inc., 1955), "in general levels requires three abilities: the ability to read the lines and merely repeat what the author says; the ability to read between the lines to interpret and appraise what the author says; and the ability to read beyond the lines to reflect on what the author says, to rearrange his ideas into a new pattern, to draw inferences and conclusions." Ruth Strang, diagnostician, had the scientific mind and the appreciation of this quality. "I have reviewed," said Dr. Rene J. Dubos of the Rockefeller Institute, "all the important scientific discoveries of the last couple of centuries--

including Darwin, Freud, Einstein--and not one of the discoveries was made by piling fact on fact. The discoveries are made rather by the scientist's perception of the significance of relationships, the meaningful pattern among facts."

Is that not what she meant about comprehension--and I repeat--"to read beyond the lines to reflect on what the author says, to rearrange his ideas into a new pattern, to draw inferences and conclusions." Furthermore she visioned diagnostic teachers in every subject teaching students to think:

"What is your evidence for that statement?"

"How do you know that is true?"

"What has been said on the other side of the question?" She had many questions.

"How do you know that is true?" I often ask a remedial client struggling over word pronunciation. After he has pronounced the word, I challenge him with "Prove it," or "How do you know?" Attempting his proof, after the initial shock at the challenge, he reveals information about the process or processes he is using. One young man revealed after confidently pronouncing how as who when asked how he knew, replied, "Oh, I take the tall letters first."

Dr. Strang told us, "Always listen to what the child is saying; but listen also to what he is not saying." She wrote: "Read the language of behavior--overactivity, aggressiveness, shyness, overconscientiousness." John Dewey said as paraphrased, no matter how remedial any student is, there is one thing that he knows better than anybody else and that is where the shoes pinch his own feet. That is what Maslow meant in discussing biological wisdom: "It means asking rather than telling. It is receptive rather than

a controlling manipulation. It is like saying that if you want to learn about ducks, then you had better ask the ducks instead of telling them. So also for human children." That is what Ruth Strang was saying to include in our diagnosis of reading problems.

Third, she challenged us to take a broad view of diagnosis, recognizing the complexity of the reading process. Listen to the words she wrote:

"Reading is one of the most difficult of all abilities to measure accurately."

"Any diagnosis must be tentative, subject to continuous revision."

"Compare tests and seek patterns of responses."

"Practice, instruction, and diagnosis are interwoven. Insights gained through any of the diagnostic methods should be immediately put to work."

She saw a place for thorough diagnostic batteries before planning instructional needs; equally she saw the place for interweaving instruction with diagnosis. If you know her philosophy, you know teacher means diagnostic teacher. "Diagnosis," she wrote, "is a complex, continuing, constantly developing understanding of the individual." In the beginning was the word and. Perhaps all diagnosis should begin with the word and; perhaps it should end with the word and too. It would remind us that no experience ever begins; there was always something preceding it. What really began, for us, was our awareness of something going on. At the end, the word and would remind us there is more to know; something more will happen. "There is always," she wrote, "an et cetera."

Fourth, she taught us to apply theory. She was theoretical, sure, but she was also pragmatic. Proof exists in three examples.

1. From her words: "The ultimate purpose of a test is to help the child realize his potential in reading and stimulate him to do something about it."

"This is what we found out. Let's do something about it."

"You use the text for the good of the person and not for the test."

2. From her books: How many introductions to books contain directions on how to read this book? Hers did. In Problems in the Improvement of Reading she pragmatically writes: "To read and apply this book set specific goals for yourself. First recall your own experiences with reading and your unanswered questions and unsolved problems in the field." That book is chock full of "how-to-do-its" too.

3. From her class requirements: From the last page of my brown class notebook I find written in my 1960 handwriting: "Test, few short answers, few true and false, essay--and this admonition from her for preparing for the final exam: "Bring together all your knowledge and focus on an ongoing position. Briefly describe the situation, for example, 'This is a 9th grade class in English.' Then bring to bear everything I've learned to help me do a good job in this particular situation."

We had to keep a notebook in Diagnosis of Reading Difficulty. It is as tattered as my favorite cookbook, and its cover has been replaced many times. This collection is separated into 10 divisions--definitions, possible causes for reading problems, diagnostic outlines, test interpretations, individual diagnosis, group diagnosis, instructional devices, work with parents, a personal reading diagnosis, and bibliography. She checked our notebooks.

Look beyond the stanine, the percentile, the grade level of a standardized test. "Analyze responses," she said. She taught us how to give Informal Reading Inventories. She taught us how to make them. She taught us how to explore a response so that the error tells us as much as the right answer. Here are some sample responses to analyze. I've heard them from my clients over the last couple of years; you have heard similar:

A third grader sang his rendition of "My Country Tis of Thee": "My country tis of fee, sweet land of diserfee, of thee I see. Land where my father died, land where the pilgrims cried, land where the mountains cried, let freedom ring."

A first grader confidently sang, "Onward Christian soldiers going for a walk."

A third grader told me why he was absent after his three week bout with pneumonia: "I had ammonia."

The young football fan was excited when he said, "The team couldn't get it across the gold line."

Parents in interview give us cues too. A mother said, "He reverses his shorts. Holds them up to him and then steps into them backwards. Goes around all day with 'Fruit of the Loom' on his belly button." Another mother wrote this on the biography of her twelfth grader: "early morning allergies, clearing during the day, since early childhood, picked to play Sneezy in the elementary school version of 'Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs.'"

The freckled blond volunteered: "I like myself. I just don't like my brain." The diagnostician must remember the understanding the poet Issa wrote:

An autumn evening:
It's no light thing,
To be born a man.

"Where is South America?"

"It is in the U.S."

The same fifth grade student who relocated South America identified Washington, D.C.: "The President is there; big buildings; in U.S. I don't know where in the U.S." He also defined buffalo as "a bull where you run by it with this red thing" and western as "like in the old days, cowboys; we don't have the West today--yes we do. In Texas."

Dr. Strang wrote, "find out by analysis of free responses and objective type questions." "Ideally, the older students should take responsibility for making their own appraisal of their reading." This I have combined with analysis of their patterned responses.

Have the college or high school student read a selection. Then ask, "What did you get from this?" "What is there?" For example with a short story genre twenty elements may exist that students should recognize, such as symbolism, plot, characterization, comparison with other stories, vocabulary, setting, style. Have each student grade his own composition. He places in the margin a point when he took note of any one element, one point only for each element. "Did you really read that short story?" His points added show him how thoroughly he read and lets him join in the diagnosis.

Sixth, Dr. Strang said look beyond the standardized test total score. What is it testing? What is it not testing? Why is it not testing? What could it be testing--a personal challenge of improvement.

Common skills dominate the popular tests. Rate of comprehension, general vocabulary, and paragraph meaning dominated the most commonly used fifteen reading tests analyzed by J. T. Hunt, an analysis Dr. Strang gave us in the Diagnosis of Reading course ("Selecting A High School Reading Test," High School Journal, vol. 39, October, 1955, 49-52). She referred

to Arthur Traxler her friend whose article she reprinted for her students in which he described abuses and misuses of standardized tests. ("Standardized Tests," NEA Journal, vol. 48, November, 1959, 18-20).

She asked questions of her students: What kind of comprehension is being measured--main ideas, details, inferences? What is the relationship of the standardized reading score to his instructional needs? How is he compensating? Can the results of the test be repeated? She made a point by writing, "Although considerable overlapping exists between scores on a general reading test and scores on tests in reading science, cannot say high scorers on a general reading test will read all kinds of material equally well." "Would it not be more helpful to describe and explain deviations than to conceal them in averages or generalizations," she asked. "Science works with concepts of average," reflected C.G. Yung, psychiatrist, "which are far too general to do justice to the subjective variety of an individual life." Where is the source of error on the test? If the student can read, does he?

Dr. Strang required when appropriate her students to take the test before they administered it. Have you taken the Watson Glaser Critical Reading, the Nelson Denny, the MMPI recently for example to "get a better feeling for the test." Furthermore, "Just as psychoanalyists are required to be analyzed before beginning to practice," she wrote, "so teachers of reading might well go through the process of improving their own reading." She required we write our reading autobiography--all experiences with reading from day one. It helped me. She required we take reading tests and analyze our weaknesses. Recently I tested a graduate student seeking his masters in Reading who had taught third grade for two years and now returned to school.

He did poorly on the nonsense syllable phonics test with such as bac, gilp, sertion. "I taught phonics," he said, "but I could never learn phonics." Did Dr. Strang by suggesting self analysis not suggest a Catch 22: "If you have flies in your eyes, you can't see the flies in your eyes." She definitely said what Rod McKuen, poet said:

> The worlds I used to know
> Are in my pocket or in my mind
> Behind the things I'm thinking now.

Seventh, I believe Ruth Strang in addition to saying

--Be a creative reading diagnostician.

--Think and teach to think.

--A diagnostic teacher continuously and constantly strives to develop information to help the child grow.

--Be pragmatic with sound theory.

--Examine individual responses. "Little things matter big."

--Know the standardized test. "As long as reading problems remain vague, indefinite, they're difficult to take hold of. But when the objectives are stated concretely, students can get to work on them and measure progress toward them.--

She was saying look beyond as a challenge to humanity, as a challenge to be. This woman whom I met after she retired from Columbia University and taught at the University of Arizona was the youngest person I ever met. She retained this childlike wonder at the world with a thousand queries at once. "Growth is," said John Henry Cardinal Newman, "the only evidence of life." She was also the largest person. She cared about her graduate students, the children with whom she worked and the reading field as a profession. She was big enough to give other people credit too. One day in class she said, "I haven't had enough experience with the subject we were discussing or drawn my conclusion on that, but such a person in the

field (which she named) believes (which she quoted).

She demanded perfection from people. She demanded it in diagnosis and in research. Before this conference I reread Problems in the Improvement of Reading. Applicable to it was the statement about Darwin's book: "Single statements he made and discovered kept the top researchers in his field busy for a century and they made their scientific reputations developing one of his truths stated therein." Therein her book exists "No one method is best," "Reading is complex," "It is a unitary process."

She challenged us to "Look beyond." "Always the beautiful answer who asks a more beautiful question." Look beyond.